

## On the Present Reality of our Posthuman Future

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Version accepted for publication in *Being Human in a Technological Age: Rethinking Theological Anthropology*, ed. Steven C. van den Heuvel (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 3-22.

*Abstract:* This chapter probes contemporary beliefs about the utility and functionality of conceptual distinctions between therapy and enhancement. Beginning with an examination of the approaches of Aristotle and Plato to academic research in ethics, the chapter suggests that contemporary ethics should learn from ancient ethics the importance of engaging common moral opinions. This chapter is an exactment of just this work in describing an investigation of student beliefs. Do they believe that therapy can, or should be, distinguished from enhancement? The paper recounts a classroom experiment evoking student reactions to documentary films. After several years of investigation, it seems clear that undergraduate students today typically have little use for the therapy-enhancement distinction. Although it is hard to maintain this distinction from an academic point of view, the chapter argues that it is best not to follow Gerald McKinney in doing away with the distinction and instead seek ways to critically resist the popular message that we have no choice but to embrace the idea of becoming *better*, rather than just than *well*. The theological grounds for this claim rest on a theological premise that part of the human task is to discover the limits that are intrinsic to being a creature as gift.

Most of us, at one time or another, feel unsettled by the rapid changes new technologies seem to be forcing on us. Yet the roots of our disquiet are not easily discerned. Given this predicament it is sometimes worthwhile to interrogate our contemporary context from an unfamiliar angle. In this chapter I pursue one such unfamiliar approach to our technological present by asking about the utility and functionality of a conceptual distinction that first emerged in medical ethics: between therapy and enhancement. The therapy–enhancement distinction came to prominence in debates around medical techniques capable of altering apparently biologically healthy bodies. Though the distinction itself has fallen out of favor, the question of whether it is a good idea to pursue such “improvements” to fully functioning human bodies sometimes returns as new techniques are proposed to alter the human body and mind.

Within theological ethics, debates about the defensibility of the therapy–enhancement distinction have reached something of an impasse. In an attempt to restart the discussion, I propose to take one step back and ask how Christian theologians should think about what counts as *research*. The chapter will unfold in three stages. It opens with a brief

consideration of the views of Aristotle and Plato about what counts as academic research in ethics. I propose that contemporary theological ethicists ought to take seriously their reasons for seeing research in ethics as necessarily engaging common moral opinions. The body of the chapter offers a running narrative of my own attempt to enact this lesson from ancient ethics. A concluding section offers a few summary thoughts about what my pedagogical experiment has revealed about the parameters of contemporary theological work on technological ethics, and specifically the domain once positioned as a debate about the ethics of enhancement.

### **Dialogical Theology**

Aristotle famously begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* by insisting on the importance of academic inquiry in ethics engaging the partial truths of popular opinion. Yes, common opinions are rife with confusions, he begins, but common opinion also contains many nuggets of wisdom to which anyone interested in how to live well ought to pay attention. Perhaps even more importantly, ethical enquiry can only succeed as an intellectual project if it persuades people to *live differently together*, (Aristotle, 1094c-1095b). Christian theologians should seriously consider granting Aristotle this point. If we want to know what it might mean to live well in a technological age, it seems prudent to at least attempt to listen to common sense opinion, a message regularly preached today by Christians deploying social scientific methods in their theological research.

However, thoughtful people were listening to common opinion long before the invention of modern social scientific methods. The figure of Socrates established conversation as a core philosophical practice at the heart of western intellectual life. For Socrates, conversation was an investigative method determined to know not only how a truth relates to all other truths, but in which social and material universe that truth continues to be intelligible. Socrates is thus seeking a specific type of truth, those truths that we *live out together*. This is why Socrates insists that the first lesson in coming into truth is the dawning awareness of the need not to know *information*, but to know what one is *after*, and *why*.

This kind of embedded truth can only be won if it is seduced out into the open, tempted out from behind the masks of convention. The power of conversation as a practice of philosophical investigation is in drawing attention to the person who is putting forward

those arguments. Ultimately, Socrates' aim in deploying what came to be called the "Socratic method," was to *display* the intrinsic connection between the capacity to dialogue well with others and the capacity to encounter one's self without illusion. Conversation is a matrix for the practice of complete presence to one another, to one's self, and so to the world (Kofman, 138-139).

By proclaiming that he does not know, Socrates is also committing himself to a form of intellectual investigation configured as an active waiting. This differs from how the figure of Socrates is deployed within Plato's philosophy. Plato incorporates Socrates' conversational mode of philosophizing by transforming it from an open-ended challenge to every interlocutor into a conversationally staged maze of pedagogically calibrated intellectual hurdles. To follow the course of hurdles he set up in his dialogue was to be trained by watching the fallacies of imaginary figures emerge in conversation with the literarily constructed figure of Socrates. Plato thus takes Socrates' live pedagogical practice out of its location in the public square by translating it into a method of systematic rational progress aimed at revealing increasingly abstract conceptualizations (Hadot, 1995, 92). It was this depoliticized and systematized internal form of dialogue that was to dominate the formation of what we know as systematic theology. From Plato to Hegel to systematic theology today, systematizers aspire to achieve a comprehensive grasp of ideas and reality. This leads to the portrayal of intellectual leadership as the capacity to generate ideas and produce typologies at the highest levels of conceptual abstraction.

This observation ought not be understood as a principled criticism of systematic theology, logicians or metaphysicians. It is rather a suggestion that having several forms of theological procedure is probably crucial in maintaining the liveliness and suppleness of the Christian tradition. What would happen to theological *practice* and the *teaching* of theology if we were to take the *form* of dialectic investigation seriously again?

Originally, *dialektiké* was a *collective* investigation, as indicated by the English word that derives from it, "dialogue." Even in Plato this more primitive definition crops up here and there. "Only when all of these things—names, definitions, and visual and other perceptions—have been rubbed against one another and tested, pupil and teacher asking and answering questions in good will and without envy—only then, when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort, can they illuminate the nature of any

object.” (Plato, 1997, *Letter VII*. 344.b, 1661) What difference might it make, practically, to approach the investigation of truth as a collective and conversational endeavor rather than the solitary pursuit so typical of contemporary academia, at least in the humanities?

Following this line of reasoning has brought me to a new point of departure. How can we show, step by step, how theologians must work their way from known into unknown territory? Any thinker who is not just repeating them self is certainly doing this work. But when theologians present this work only in the form of polished texts summarizing their *conclusions*, they hide their own the *processes* of getting to those conclusions. Only the few students privileged to study directly at the feet of a master ever get to see the working processes out of which theology springs. These considerations suggest that there might be very good pedagogical reasons to explore the form of theological dialogue if our aim is to *display* where theological insight, real insight, actually *comes from*, how it is *generated* or *received*.

### **An experiment in listening**

The lesson of Socrates is that a properly supple investigation of how Christians are to live well in a technological society will need to grapple with the cultural context in which the conversation is taking place. Substantial moral forces are constantly bearing down on us as we attempt to think theologically about our ways of life. In recounting my own experiment in taking common opinion seriously, I hope it will also begin to become clear how this work of close listening inevitably changes the questions we ask as theologians.

“Technology” is a vast theme. In order not to be overwhelmed by its complexity, I have argued for an initial division of the theme under two broad headings (Brock, 2010, chapters 6 and 8). We can call some techniques and devices innovative in having been created with the aim of reshaping some aspect of the fabric of human relations. These might be labelled “political.” Other technologies have been developed primarily to reshape the processes of the material world, including biological life. I continue to find this a theologically defensible and practically useful way of opening discussions of any given technology. On any account there are many developments in both domains that deserve serious theological scrutiny. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, social media, and web-based computing are reshaping what I am calling our political relations (within which I include economic

structures) and raising a host of ethical problems that beg for theological analysis. The many attempts to alter biological life processes through the rise of genetic techniques and nanotechnologies, as well as the push for bodily enhancement more generally, are equally ripe for close critical examination.

In this chapter I examine a set of questions around the alteration of life. A handful of thinkers in the English-speaking world are doing important and careful work engaging questions in this domain; Brent Waters (2006), Robert Song (2002), Neil Messer (2011) and Gerald McKinney, to name the most prominent. In late 2016 we had the opportunity in Aberdeen to read a pre-publication draft of McKinney's 2018 book, *Biotechnology, Human Nature and Christian Ethics* (2018). As I read and debated the book by e-mail with McKinney, I began to wonder if the discussion among academics was starting to drift free in problematic ways from the main lines of popular thinking about the ethics of human enhancement.

Put bluntly, it seemed to me that McKinney had gone further than I thought prudent in accepting at face value the claims of those who are developing technologies and drugs for enhancing human bodies and minds. The highly nuanced argument of *Biotechnology, Human Nature and Christian Ethics* finally concludes that the therapy–enhancement distinction is fatally flawed. There is no fixed “human nature” that can provide a baseline for judging whether medical techniques are therapies or enhancements. Human beings have been altering themselves by way of prostheses and pharmaceutical interventions for many generations, not to mention the drastic effects produced by social technologies such as education. All these technical alterations of the human lifeworld have not had trivial effect in reshaping how we experience what it means to be embodied human beings. Thus the belief that we are stepping into a wholly new realm, or turning ourselves into cyborgs by altering the human genome or implanting technological innovations such as neural-nano interfaces, simply overlooks the massive continuities these techniques share with a much longer journey of human self-alteration, begun when we fashioned false teeth for ourselves, started wearing glasses, taking antibiotics and sending our children to school.

More than anyone else, the bioethicist Carl Elliot had shown me that somehow there has to be a morally important piece missing from this story. Even if McKinney is right that human nature is not a fixed entity and that the therapy-enhancement divide is not conceptually

sustainable, does that mean that Christians should support the trend toward increasingly trying to make our bodies better than they are? Elliot's 2003 book, *Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream*, examines what it looks like in practice to proceed as if there are no distinctions to be made between therapy and enhancement. A distinction might be useful even if it is impossible to draw a sharp line between the alternatives. Or perhaps the distinction is bad and we should seek a better way to make it.

In the United States today, "biohacking" has become a common aim, understood as the self-optimization of the individual's biological powers (Marsh 2018). It is no longer possible to say with any intellectual coherence that there is something morally questionable about a girl wanting to starve herself because she feels too fat, or a boy wanting to take steroids because in his self-image he is much bigger, or a college student taking drugs to achieve better grades. Michel Foucault's account of biopower as the political imperative to technically augment the powers of life appears to have trickled down to determine how each individual views the imperative to optimize the functioning of their own body. It seems quaint today to remain content with simple wellness. Techniques are available to make one look and feel like the heroic, beautiful, and high-performing human specimens who star in the dominant cultural narratives of our time. Elliot takes pains to point out that this new cultural norm did not arise by accident, but has been assiduously created by those who profit by telling people that they can be more athletic, smarter, more beautiful, and have more and better sex; most notably, big pharma.

*If* this is the world Christians are living in today (and I think Elliot has made his case persuasively), then it seems dangerous for Christians to align themselves with those who are keen to offer more and deeper enhancement opportunities (however enticingly labelled), as McKinney finally does. It is dangerous because we are thinking about these issues in a culture that no longer has any language that allows people to perceive *any* value in the givenness of life. It is one thing to say that the death of God has transformed creation into nature. It is quite another to positively affirm the claim that nature not only can but must be made better. It is embracing this second claim that seems most theologically problematic. But resisting it depends on having a robust sense of what it means to be inhabitants of a secular modern world and yet affirm the material world not as "nature", but as "creation". That's one problem.

A second has to do with the focus of the work of theological ethicists in recent decades. Newspaper pundits often say, “our technology is ahead of our ethics.” But it could also be a dangerous evasion to assume that the problems that *really* need attention are the scary technical developments just over the horizon. Might the guild of professional ethicists somehow have fallen into a trap in concentrating on the gorillas just over the horizon of technological development? There may already be a herd of elephants filling the room with their aromatic dung. Or to switch the metaphor, the enhancement train has already left the station, and we are on it. These, at least, were the hypotheses that I was keen to test in the forum of popular opinion.

I had also been provoked to consider these questions by a conversation on a hospital ward in Aberdeen with a Dutch paediatric oncologist. It was July, *Tour de France* time in Europe, and I happened to mention that I was trying to watch an occasional stage on TV. The doctor became visibly agitated, denouncing as abuse the peloton’s use of drugs developed to treat seriously sick children. At the time, the doping drug of choice was erythropoietin, colloquially known as “EPO.” EPO is a peptide hormone produced naturally by the kidneys, that stimulates the bone marrow to produce red blood cells. When artificially synthesized and injected into the muscles, it markedly boosts red blood cell production, allowing greater exertion and decreased recovery time. A drug funded and developed to offer therapeutic benefit to children facing the ravages of chemotherapy had become the drug of choice among a great number of healthy athletes seeking to enrich themselves and entertain fans by enhancing their sporting performance. For this doctor, at least, this is a clear-cut example of why it makes important moral sense to be able to distinguish between therapy and enhancement. What I wanted to know is whether she was alone in clinging to the distinction, whether her moral outrage at what she saw as an abuse was more narrowly connected to her professional involvement in cancer treatment, her being from an older generation, or was perhaps even a characteristically Dutch view.

I was lucky enough to have devised a perfect laboratory in which to investigate the question: a class I was about to begin teaching, called “Film as a Public Ethical Arena.” The format of the class is simple: I show a documentary film chosen to provoke morally interesting questions about life as it is already being lived by the students. At the end of the film, I pass out index cards and ask them to answer a very simple question: “What is the

most important ethical question raised by this film?” The film functions as a Rorschach test, a complex figure provoking students to articulate their guiding moral sensibilities. The main part of the class is an extended discussion about the presumptions embedded in the ethical questions the students have highlighted. The first half of the course contains students studying a wide range of subjects, most in humanities degrees of some sort, including theology. During the second half of the term, however, a cohort of medical students join in, as part of an elective medical humanities degree. I cluster the films around questions of the alteration of biological life during that part of the course attended by the medical students. This has also turned out to be useful, since marked differences in sensibility regularly emerge between medical students and those studying other disciplines.

My question is now clear: Do people believe any more that therapy can or should be distinguished from enhancement? And my method of investigation has been outlined: showing films and seeing what questions they raise. Here is how my investigation proceeded.

The course began in 2015, and included a sequence of three films that proved such provocative conversation starters that I repeated it in 2016. The 2005 film “Our Daily Bread” (Geyrhalter, 2005.) beautifully introduces the theme of the technological reshaping of life by following, in long slow pans without any commentary, the various processes that bring foods into our grocery stores, and so onto our own bodies. We see dairy cows being milked by machines and birthing calves by caesarean section. We see the collection and processing of the semen of gigantic double-muscle Belgian blue beef cattle by lab-coated technicians. We see cows, pigs, and chickens being killed and butchered in factory conditions. We see the life cycle of battery hens, layers and broilers, whose eggs are incubated in massive heated cabinets, and machine sorted after they hatch. Their beaks are hand docked before they are packed off to live their lives in large warehouses. We see machines that cut the tails off piglets, gut fish, strip the skins off cows, burn the hair off pig carcasses. We see the inside of the greenhouses where bell peppers and courgettes grow with occasional baths of pesticides, sprayed by men in hazmat suits. We see machines shaking olives from trees, and immigrant pickers on their knees digging asparagus and harvesting lettuce. Sometimes we see the workers eating their lunches. The presentation is studiously non-polemical. No voiceover tells the audience how to read the images: we are simply offered a window on



what counts in Europe today as ethical and efficient food production. What is blindingly obvious is that the modern European relation to plants and animals has become highly mechanized and industrialized.

Almost every student receives some measure of moral shock from the film. Have we really mechanized our relation to living things to such an extent? Is it right to treat animals and plants alike solely as food production units? Are we somehow degraded as human beings by so casually instrumentalizing sentient and even non-sentient beings? When pressed, these moral questions typically mutate into aesthetic objections: it just seems wrong to live this way, it looks ugly, even in the humane and hygienic form presented in the film. There is something about the mass processing and artificial reproduction of genetically altered animal bodies that sticks in the craw. This mutation of moral objections into aesthetic objections often happens at the moment students realize how different life in western Europe would have to be if we attempted to change these practices. We are enmeshed in processes of industrial food production that it would cause massive disruption and expense to challenge. When the magnitude of what it would mean to have a moral objection to this way of life sinks in, it seems obvious to most that the only realistic response is to just admit that we find it hard to look at.

Engagement with our ways of treating animal and plant bodies prepares the ground for the main question to be broached: Will there be a similar reaction to the application of exactly these techniques to the human body? The 2014 film, "Stop at Nothing: The Lance Armstrong Story" (Holmes, 2014) powerfully introduces this question by following Armstrong's regime for manipulating his own body. Armstrong has become the icon of long-term and systematic use of EPO to enhance not only his sporting performance, but his whole persona. He is the telegenic victor over cancer who ruled the Tour for years. Since EPO was a banned substance for the duration of his reign, his entire career rested on an illegal performance enhancement. Along the way we also discover the wide social implications of the regime of body alteration he followed for well over a decade.

Armstrong is not above trying to crush the careers of those he considered traitors. The film offers excruciating details of the coercive lengths Armstrong was willing to go to protect his great secret. One aspect of this was ideological: as an American cyclist he was able to understand and exploit the leniency that had long been shown among tour officials for

riders taking performance enhancing substances while *at the same time* understanding the American idealization of world-class athletic performance as a valorisation of hard work and natural ability. But behind the scenes, Armstrong was going to great lengths to ensure that the ideology of disciplined performance was applied to himself as a sporting icon, while being ignored by his American teammates, some of whom felt increasingly guilty. The film follows the unravelling of Armstrong's carefully curated public image as his subordinates slowly tire of telling to themselves and their family members the lies necessary to cover their team's doping. Eventually one of them cracks and tells the truth to the media and the dominoes come tumbling down.

The student reaction to the film was relatively uniform: the ethical problem was Armstrong's coercion of his teammates, and all the lying that this entailed, not the doping itself. It was his body, and his choice. A variation of that argument was that the fans were right to love him, he was beautiful when he was on form, and he too was part of a wider culture of doping, so he cannot be singled out for blame. In two years of showing the film, no more than three students, themselves keen athletes, dared ask: But wasn't he cheating? It was a question that the majority found easy to answer: yes, he was cheating, but the rules against doping are out of date. If athletes wish to risk their bodies by enhancing them with various chemical interventions, the prohibition of cheating in sport is a taboo without moral substance and should simply be dropped.

I double-checked my growing sense that my students had no use for the therapy-enhancement distinction by showing the 2008 television documentary entitled "Sex Change Soldier" (Preston, 2008). This film follows the first serving British military officer to undergo a sex change. We follow him to Thailand, where he undergoes a highly invasive surgical sex change that involves breaking and reshaping the nose and forehead, removing the face to reshape the hairline, and eyes, as well as the removal of male genitalia and the reconstruction of female genitalia. The documentary does not spare the viewer the mechanics of the operations. Though our current moral climate made this a ticklish film to discuss in a university classroom, it is worth noting that not a single student expressed moral qualms about such intense manipulation of the body. This soldier was exercising a choice about how to treat the body. Cracks only began to emerge in this moral consensus when I asked whether it should be paid for by the NHS, which raised, from a different angle,

the question of whether this rather intensive medical treatment was healing or improving the body.

Thus, neither the Armstrong movie nor Sex Change Soldier generated any genuine moral resistance to the idea that human bodies can be reconfigured at will. What was objectionable was Armstrong's bullying, and the British Army's discriminatory refusal to employ the post-op sex change soldier. To throw someone out of the army because they had improved their body seemed to most much like the ban on doping in sports—a relic of a bygone moral era.

The verdict from the first round of the experiment thus appeared essentially unambiguous: the distinction between enhancement and therapy had gone. Though it was somehow unsightly to manipulate plant and animal bodies in highly mechanized and instrumentalized ways, the radical alteration of the human body evoked no such qualms. What was at least clear is that if students had qualms about the radical remaking of the human body, they at least believed they had no right publicly to question *other* people's right to remake their bodies as radically as they please.

I decided to see how deep this consensus went in the 2017 version of the class. Still beginning with "Our Daily Bread", I swapped the Armstrong movie and the sex change movie for one about a pop star killing herself with bulimia, alcohol and drugs, and another about the intertwining of performance enhancing drugs and popular American culture.

The 2015 film "Amy" (Kapida, 2015) follows the young British pop star Amy Winehouse as she escapes from the manipulative pressures of fame into drugs, bulimia, and booze. It is a desperately sad film. Understandably, the students are alarmed by the toxicity of our fame culture, and the unfaithfulness of Winehouse's family and friends as she spiralled out of control. But the blind spot reappeared when asked what a faithful friend *should* have said to Amy. The students strongly affirmed that they had no right to say she should not do what she liked with her body, but they could have stayed closer to her as she did so, protected her from more cameras and press hounding.

I followed "Amy" with the more light-hearted 2008 documentary, "Bigger, Stronger, Faster\*" (Bell, 2008). The film follows the quest of one of three adult brothers considering taking anabolic steroids. His two brothers are unabashed steroid users, one because he

aspires to be a professional wrestler, the other because he is a competitive weightlifter who will have to give up the sport if he gives up the steroids. The weightlifter is also a high school football coach, who admits the duplicity of his telling his student athletes that they can succeed through discipline and hard work while himself taking steroids. The film traces how this duplicity also characterized the lives of some major American cultural icons in the 1980s and 90s, held up as paragons of discipline and physical prowess for bodies built by steroids. The epitome of this cultural trajectory arrives in 1990 with George H. W. Bush standing on the White House lawn and announcing the appointment of the ostentatiously enhanced Arnold Schwarzenegger as chairman of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

The moral configuration of this cultural moment is beautifully illustrated at the end of the documentary. The protagonist is from a devout Christian family that has been having some morally fraught conversations about the morality of steroid use and the lying that goes with it. The movie ends as the family watches the weightlifting son in a competition. The camera is turned on the family as the son succeeds in lifting the massive weights that will win him the competition. The final freeze frame image of the film captures the moral bottom line of this time and place: every member of the family is leaping to their feet with massive smiles on their faces to cheer their son's victory. The filmmaker's thesis is obvious, and clearly indicated in the film's subtitle: Americans will do whatever it takes to win. In the end, that includes embracing all the pharmaceutical enhancements necessary to get there, even if some moral guilt remains.

I tried a fresh angle in 2018. Perhaps the films I had been showing focused so much on the question of individual choice that they had never allowed students to interrogate the social implications of bodily modification. Since there had been glimmers that these social implications had bothered a few student athletes, I found a movie that managed to foreground the social dynamics of doping in sports. The award-winning 2017 documentary "Icarus" (Fogel, 2017) starts out much like "Bigger, Stronger, Faster," with the protagonist asking whether he should take performance enhancing drugs to compete in a week-long bicycle race in the European mountains. The film follows the protagonist pursuing a doped performance, giving himself injections and reconfiguring his training to maximise the drug effects—to generally treat his body like a machine to be optimized. Everything falls apart

when he crashes in the cycle event, dashing his dream of being able to compare his doped and non-doped performance.

Only when his individual story is over does the real drama of the film begin, as the Russian who has been coaching him on his drug and training regime is slowly engulfed in a public scandal. It turns out that his coach, Dr. Grigory Rodchenkov, had been the director of Russia's national anti-doping laboratory for decades. The documentary maker has been filming the key actor facilitating decades of state-sponsored doping. And to his horror, the fact that Rodchenkov is admitting this on camera is very likely to get him killed. Putin will not stand idly by while a decade of Olympic gold hauls are tarnished by his chief doctor confessing to systematic Russian doping. The film ends as a political thriller, the one-time amateur cyclist dabbling in doping becoming a covert agent smuggling his coach out of Russia to avoid a political assassination.

It was a film that seemed to admirably illustrate the individualist fallacy behind the “my body my choice” ontology, at least as it plays out in sports and politics. For the first time it was plain to see that if one person enhances, immense pressure is placed on everyone to follow suit. The film presses the point as to whether modifying life—bodies—really can be disconnected from the forms taken by political relationships. The two domains of technology may be distinguishable, but are never unrelated to one another. Manipulating bodies will entail alteration of the social order. While it was clear that this film revealed these connections to the students, it was not the moral question that captured their attention. What stood out to them was the murderous politics of Putin’s Russia. Doping, including state-sponsored doping, was morally uninteresting. When pressed, they admitted that it might be nice if the Olympics were enhancement-free, but it is pure romanticism to believe we are ever going to see a drug-free Olympics in our lifetimes. Ban enhancements, or don’t ban them, the tide will not be stopped—we have entered an era when enhancement is simply going to happen, whether we want it to or not.

Which brings us to 2018. Once more I shuffled the cards. “Our Daily Bread” was again my opener, but this time followed by the recently released film, “Take Your Pills” (Klayman, 2018). This documentary follows several figures, including a young man who is grappling with his identity after having been given, from a very young age, a stimulant called Ritalin and intended to calm attention deficit disorder. He is a highly talented artist, and the film’s

title refers to his extensive artistic explorations of the pressure that his parents and teachers had put on him, as long as he could remember, to “take your pills.” The film also follows an African American mother asking whether she should put her young teenage son on drugs that will make him behave better in school, as well as a professional football player reflecting on the reasons that he thought he needed to take drugs to sharpen his mind and succeed as an athlete.

The pressure to perform faced by all American college students, tech workers, and financial analysts and to take mind-enhancing drugs to succeed in these domains emerges as a major theme as the film progresses. For those wishing to move up the social ladder, taking drugs like Ritalin and Adderall to enhance concentration is fast becoming an entrenched part of modern American society. In the 80s and 90s professional sports people were choosing to enhance their bodies to win. Today a much larger number of average American citizens are feeling they need to enhance their minds just to survive economic competition. What was once called enhancement has settled into a widespread and habitual pharmaceutical alteration of brain function.

I concluded my experiment by probing the question from a totally different angle. What if this world in which everyone lives with a sense that they must change their bodies just to keep up was juxtaposed with a cultural space organized with the alternative aim of accepting and loving everyone just as they are? The 2017 documentary “Summer in the Forest” (Wright, 2017) depicts the events of one summer at two L’Arche communities, one in France, the other in Bethlehem. L’Arche is a movement founded by Jean Vanier, with the explicit aim of recovering a liveable life for people with intellectual disabilities. Vanier wanted to foster a culture different in kind from the violence and isolation that had been typical of institutions for the learning impaired in the first half of the twentieth century. In a world where everyone believes they must progress and win in a competition to succeed, inevitably crushing some in the process, what would it look like if we slowed down and configured our lives together in a manner that let people move at their own pace? Was it possible to receive one another, with all our limitations, in communities where we live together? (Vanier, chapter 1)

Showing “Summer in the Forest” right after “Take Your Pills” drew attention to the social implications of our relation to our bodies. One week we were having Silicon Valley computer

programmers tell us about their daily drug regime and hearing about Wall Street traders ending up in hospital after working 50 hours straight with pharmaceutical help. The next week we were watching slow moving scenes of a man with physical and mental disabilities working to shave himself, or a picnic where people with disabilities and carers shared a meal together. During the discussion of “Take your Pills,” it was clear that the students felt there to be something genuinely threatening about a world in which one has to enhance to survive. But they found it almost impossible to articulate what the problem could be. At the same time, they found Vanier’s rival vision utterly bewildering. Why are we watching a film about care homes for disabled people? What does this have to do with us? For them, the world of competition to survive was so obviously the “real” world that the premise and logic of L’Arche were not only alien, but existed in a different, foreign, universe. They mustered a few questions about why all care homes weren’t so peaceful, and why modern developed nations weren’t prepared to fund care homes to reach the obviously attractive standards of care displayed in “Summer in the Forest.” But they simply could not see the connection between the politics of enhancement, and the politics of gracious acceptance of given life.

### **In place of a conclusion**

I have not established that students today have lost the therapy–enhancement distinction. It may be that they fear to speak publicly in defence of it. Since I was also reading their written reflections on the films, I knew that their more personal reflections were often deeper and more explicit about their own positions, suggesting that there are some muffling and exaggerating effects that come with having the discussion in a relatively large group. Though there are practical ways to probe whether students have ideas they are afraid to voice, or whether they are utterly unfamiliar with a particular idea, the dynamics of speaking in public and in groups will always attend all attempts at Socratic investigation of public opinion.

What does seem clear from even the most cursory survey of public rhetoric in the popular press is that technological development is spontaneously going to bring about equality, transparency, financial security, in short, justice and freedom. Of this we are constantly assured. Too often the promises attached to new technologies direct our attention away

from the materiality of our lives and from the power of those who benefit by our current cultural trajectories. Gerald McKinney is probably right that the therapy–enhancement distinction is hard to maintain, especially if we try to do so with a naturalized account of human nature. But I remain convinced that Christians should be seeking ways to critically resist the massive wave of cultural messaging that is determined to persuade us we have no choice but to positively embrace becoming better rather than merely well.

What seems incontrovertible is that the enhancement train has left the station. We’re not so much becoming cyborg as *already* doled out over all sorts of networks. Our social lives, our memories, our money, even our cognitive processing is strewn across a global network of data centers and server farms. We are already as committed to this way of life as we are to industrial food production. We are going to go wherever these commitments take us. We are not going to be able to go off-grid, or at least not anytime soon.

Hence my question: Should Christians be on the side of this status quo? Precisely what sort of claim are we making when, invoking the name of Christ, we say today that we should embrace what was formerly called enhancement? Has the form of life we know as western industrialized democracies *already* achieved *true* justice? Can we really honestly affirm that, in a world that is consuming its resources at an alarming rate, the question of whether Christians are for or against enhancement is even the right question to ask? The environmental crisis is a major clue that Christians ought at least see the wisdom of attempts to speak up for ways of life that seek to accept creaturely limit as valuable, that wish to embrace the given contours and limits of creation without investing vast energy and research funding into making life something new and improved.

We might even read our generation’s passion for virtual reality as a prophetic sign that we have become people from whom reality is no longer enough. It should probably at least spur us to some reflection about what it is that we’re trying to escape from by enhancing ourselves. Even my choice of documentary films is an exploration of this point. One of the defining characteristics of contemporary image production is that its basic technologies are digital. This is why CGI, “morphing,” and all sorts of digital alteration have become commonplace in our culture, from movies to advertisements to the pictures of themselves that young people post on social media. Documentaries remind us that the creaturely world is more mundane and resistant to our designs. We can easily alter an image: altering the



physical world takes much more knowhow and practical investment. Each of the films discussed in this chapter displays how common it is for us westerners to be frustrated with the limits of the flesh—and how regularly technologies are presented to us that promise we can transcend those limits. Along with imagery of steroid and surgery-enhanced celebrities, our culture is rife with cartoon figures sporting more-powerful-than-human prostheses. Our cultural dreams are rarely satisfied with mere mortality, and the assumptions about bodies in this visual culture include the loss of the political horizon that has become characteristic of our time. The fantasy of our desire is to have a body that is more than our body, even though this is almost never our experience of mundane technological “enhancements.” (Ihde, 14-15). This is the cultural landscape that renders it almost impossible to argue against the offer of technological transcendence of creaturely givenness.

Within such a cultural context it is important for Christians to be clear on at least one point: if we are committed to the just distribution of resources and political power, we will only occasionally find that technological developments hold any promise of achieving these ends. Conversely, if we believe that technological development itself will somehow achieve these ends autonomously, we are going to end up with the distribution of justice and political power that emerges from the technological trajectories already described.

Christians and non-Christians alike appear to have entirely lost the capacity to conceive the virtues that the monastic tradition called stability and poverty. We simply cannot resign ourselves to live in our place, we cannot accept the givenness of our own bodies as good, and we are willing to risk anything to remake it into something more satisfying. And we’ve decided to live with the unsightliness that this produces. To change, we believe, would make us poorer. If we cared more for animal bodies or even the bodies of workers it would cost too much, impoverish our diet too much. We shirk extending the conveniences of our lifestyle to the rest of the world, because we know that if they lived like we live, we would be poorer, and the world’s resources would be consumed even more rapidly as the glaciers melt and the seas rise.

Having limits is intrinsic to being a creature. I would suggest that this is one of the main messages Christians in the developed world need urgently to hear. This is not a denial of human capacity and authority to reshape creation. We are not forbidden to fly because we were not born with wings, nor condemned to pain in childbirth out of a misplaced sense

that it is decreed by God or nature. What we are not free to do is to act as if infinite plasticity and constant and total self-remaking is our nature and goal (contra Tanner, chapter 1) as a self-justifying defence of our inability to be reconciled to *any* limits (Creamer, chapter 5). Once we assume our body can be infinitely manipulated, we will not avoid its instrumentalization, its transformation into the status of a tool.

This inability to embrace stability and poverty points to the distinct possibility that, in the final analysis, even modern Christians are incapable of understanding that all-important third monastic vow: obedience. It is hard to see how a people who cannot abide staying in one place or accept their bodies and the bodies of others will be able to conceive living in obedience to a tradition that demands their lives, demands they conform themselves to a non-negotiable word of God. It is hard to imagine that many Christians today can articulate what it means to have one's desires thwarted by a divine word and the claim of a God who is outspokenly committed to justice and to ending the oppression of those crushed by the strong.

If modern Christians can rediscover the intelligibility of that chastity to which the old monks and nuns committed themselves, we might still be able to offer something to a world enslaved by the freedom to have, to consume, and to perform. Only those who have come to experience limits tangibly, not as slavery but as the very condition of being human, will be able to see through the powerful glittering of technological promises. No one, Christian or non-Christian, can afford to let their eyes glaze over when conversation turns to technology. To give up on these discussions is to give up on people and their flourishing. It is to cede ethics to those who care more about augmenting their wealth and power than about what humans are doing to each other and the creaturely world.

It should be Christians leading the way in seeking out the vestiges of those gentler ways of living that have been all but erased from the hard drive of western culture. Only those looking for more convivial and patient ways of life, forms of life more at home with imperfection and variation, will discover the fleeting openings offered to us amidst a form of life perhaps best called surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). We must dare to hope that a God content to slow down to the speed of the human body is still offering ways back into forms of life content with the human body we have been given, and with it, the whole earth.

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